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Title: Representation of Women in Graphic Narratives: A Study of Indian Comics between 1960 and 2017

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Synopsis

As an offshoot of popular culture, comics is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu it breathes in. In its potentials of engaging both verbal and visual perspectives of readers, comics emerge as a double-edged dynamic genre. The canvas of comics offers a matrix of encoded signs of cultural production. Representation in the graphic form becomes a tool of portraying people and situations in a more appealing way. The vivid visuals as expressions of ideas are directly stimulating to the readers. Comics, thus, involuntarily disseminate knowledge through semiotics. In my research project I want to unravel the politics of representation women are subjected to in and beyond the space of graphic panels of Indian comics. My discussion will centre on analyzing the visuals of the feminine body (fat/ thin, muscular/ puny, long hair/ short hair, alluring/ hideous, fair / dark), the outfits (saree, salwar-kameez, jeans-tshirt or latex bondage costume) that turn out to be their insignia, the domestic and public space (kitchen, drawing room, street, public transport, office and many more) they move in and out, representation of professions (house-wives, teachers, corporate employees, writers etc.) and the sketched sexuality. To engage in a study of the stereotypes women are encaged within, I would zoom in selected narratives in the graphic medium within the ambit of 1960 and 2017.

The dissertation would attempt to study comic book series of *Chacha Chaudhury* (a 1971 creation of cartoonist Pran Kumar Sharma), *Shrimatiji* (a stereotype of an Indian housewife created by Pran in 1968), *Bahadur* (sketched by Abid Surti in 1976 for Indrajal Comics), *Shakti* (created by Anupam Sinha in 1986), *Priya's Shakti* (Ram Devineni created 2014 icon of women empowerment in India), *Devi* (a Shekhar Kapur fictional superheroine debuting in 2006), *Snake Woman* (drawn by Shekhar Kapur in 2007) and Manjula Padmanavan's *Suki* (weekly published in Bombay's *Sunday Observer* from1982 to 1986 and revived in 1992 in *Pioneer*, New Delhi). I would also include under the purview of my discussions the stereotypes created by Narayan Debnath in his *Shootki ar Mookti* (1964) and the lack of representation of women characters in *Handa Bhonda* (1962), *Bantul the Great* (1965) and *Nonte Fonte* (1969). The texts I have primarily chosen for my analysis contain women characters from diverse social spheres. While Bini Chachi (wife of Chacha Chaudhary) and Shrimatiji are typical housewives, Bela in *Bahadur* is a female companion of superhero Bahadur. Unlike Devi and Shakti who are gifted with superpowers, Suki is a modern woman trying hard coping in a corporate workplace. The reason behind choosing this miscellaneous range of women characters is reflecting the essentially ambiguous nature of representation across time and space.

Though the traces of the tradition of comic art is not rare in the cultural past of India, comics in the more organized form of strips, books or magazines evolved around 1850s as an attempt to emulate the West. Whether as a potent medium to reflect the changing socio-economic scenario of the colonial period or to flag the cultural ethos fast fading in the face of western impinges, comics in India was then and even now a spin-off bearing the colonial legacy. Elements of comic art permeate the panoramic expanse of Indian illustrative creations, the genesis of comics rooted in one of the nine *rasa*s (flavours) of Indian aesthetic: the *hasya rasa* (the comic) (Lent 21). Indian sculptures, engravings, paintings and sketches from ancient time contain a plethora of the forms of caricature and witty playful images, used as a means of social satire and parody, elements integrally related to the art of comics.

Among the numerous attempts at visual satires ranging from representing in an exaggerated way the haughty patronizing lifestyles of the *babu*s (Western-educated Hindus) to the issues of primitive social and religious practices that were condemned and challenged in the colonial era, *The Delhi Sketch Book* (a cartoon magazine from 1850 to 1857), *Indian Punch* (1859), *Calcutta Charivari* (from 1872 lasting until 1880) and *Basantak* (1874 -1876) were renowned names for satirical drawings. These periodicals abound in the visual portrayals reflecting scathing political and social satires and their attempts to communicate in the verbal-visual medium met with success as a readership with a taste for the witty and humorous gradually got developed.

Independence bred a kind of stability in the socio-political situation and comics as a multi-faceted genre started strengthening its foothold across the country. Indianized forms of graphic narratives embarked on the verbal-visual journey in the 1960s (with Anant Pai and "Amar Chitra Katha" / "Immortally Captivating Picture Stories") heralding the heritage of Indian cultural ethos encoded in culturally nuanced semiotics. Throughout all these decades culminating in the present century, graphic space in India has seen a myriad of production both in fiction and non-fiction. There have been attempts to create superheroes/heroines in the prototype of Western exemplars (like in the Raj Comics' fictional superhero figures of Super Commando Dhruva, debuting in 1987 or Doga, appearing in 1992). In parallel with the imitational proneness, the superheroes and superheroines are at their inception injected with the seeds of a mythic past to make them essentially Indian.

The scope of graphic narratives has remained immense as it successfully adopts the façade of being narratives of children. The oxymoronic playfulness provides a potent space for critiquing and commenting on socio-political scenarios. The readership of these image-texts was at a time mostly dominated by male adolescents and adults, though surprisingly one of the first comics-artists in India is Sukhalata Rao who drew panels for the Bengali magazine "Sandesh" in the 1920s. Women authors of graphic narratives at this early stage were surely a handful, but they somehow catered to the male readership, drawing stories following the models of their male counterparts. Sukhalata drew panels on the relationship between the teacher and the student or naughty acts of a truant boy (Fig. 1), recurrent motifs in comic panels. The name of Maitreyi Mukhopadhyay, famous for her "Boka Ginnir Golpo"/ "Stupid Wives' Tale", stupidity or silliness in wives is again a traditionalist treatment, was also a well-heard one. Graphic narratives in recent times have embraced women both as readers and as authors/artists but whether they can avoid the representational politics or not is still a debatable issue.

It is intriguing that women both technically and content-wise rarely occupy centrality of panels. The delightful humour of the comic panels lies in representing women in their extreme stereotypes. A reference to a *patachitra* of the *patua*s of Kalighat is worth mentioning here only to capture the perpetual tradition of stereotypical portrayal as a normative method of disseminating accepted cultural codes. A famous sensational story from the 1870s found a sketchy way in the *pata*s, sequentially narrating the extra-marital love-affair between Elokeshi and a religious head. The sequence of *pata*s ends in the beheading of Elokeshi by her husband as an act of punishment for polygamy. Strikingly enough, the fate of the priest who slipped from maintaining a moral fibre is nowhere to be seen in the *pata*s.

A shift in focus to the post-independence panels does not offer a comforting glance either. Taking, for example, one of the most popular comic strips from the 1970s, *Chacha Chaudhary*, a creation of Pran Kumar Sharma, we get a character of a wise old man whose "strength comes from brain, not brawn". The comic strip that turned the popularity of the American superheroes topsy-turvy portrays a character named Bini Chachi, the wise man's bossy yet unwise wife obsessed with polka dot sari and top bun hairstyle. She attacks the thieves with *belan* (rolling pin), nags Chacha for jewelries and her extreme forms of stupidities are often causes readers roll on the floor laughing. Amidst the cloud of whimsicality and brainlessness of the big fat Bini Chachi, Chacha's wit and wisdom shines.

The representation of women in comics has rarely crossed the borderlines of stereotypes. Even in the figures of superheroines (like in the characters of Shakti by Raj Comics and Devi by Virgin Comics) the attempts of commodifying the female body is glaringly visible. Considering the targeted readership of young adults, the role of comics instrumental in propagating a gendered discourse cannot be easily denied. Women are not only misrepresented, their identities being reduced to play the cultural stereotypes, but they are also not represented at all. Whereas representation of *chhelebela* (boyhood) is one of the most recurrent pattern in graphic forms, rendition of *meyebela* (girlhood) is exceptionally scarce. My area of focus in this venture lies in positioning graphic narratives in India as a form perpetuating cultural hierarchies and to discuss on that I would follow the route of representation women encounter. My discussion will attempt to elucidate how far the ambivalent portrayal is able to disseminate a gendered discourse through repetitive reproduction. I am specifically concerned with the ways of seeing and being seen involving the women characters on the panels. Furthermore, I would undergo the act of reading images as well as texts inseparably linked, to unravel the stream of cultural consciousness embodied in semiotics.

Indian comics lie as a potential field of exploration as much work has not been done interpreting the powerful semiotics of the visual media employed. Robert Peterson's prefatory work *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (2011) records the emergence and development of Indian comics in one of his chapters on "Graphic Narratives in Asia". His discussions are illuminating as a lead-in record but nowhere does he discuss the tropes, motifs, thematic or technical patterns recurrent in Indian comics and graphic novels. His accounts as well as that of John A. Lent's *Asian Comics* are archival projects faithful in recording the journey of Indian comics from pre-independence to the present day. Pramod K. Nayar's *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique* endeavors to talk about the representation strategies in the verbal-visual medium but the woman question and issues of gender are not fundamental to the analysis. The pivotal discussions of my thesis on

representational politics questioning perpetuation of gendered hierarchy would open up a new spectacle of reading Indian comics.

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